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Returning: Thoughts about the editorial and publication processes in dermatology and medicine

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Abstract It is the intention of the author to present his ideas about the ways in which scientific information in dermatology and medicine should be transmitted in writing. There is a brief analysis of practices in the past and of current procedures, along with ideas about what the near future will bring. The approach is conservative, according to the value given to traditional methods and to ethical considerations. It is hoped that it also looks ahead for new methodologies that might enhance the scope of information. Additionally, there is discussion of corrective measures that may prevent chaos or dishonesty in the information and its use.

Prelude

Sometimes, during a person's lifetime, he returns to his hometown after a long absence. Alternatively, the return is not to the home, but to a city, neighborhood, or institution that he knew well, where he had lived or worked. It takes time to get used to change, and there is an illogical feeling that things ought to have remained as they were. Soon, the picture becomes clear. In many cases there are signs of progress and development: Buildings are taller, roads wider, sidewalks better. There are avenues that have replaced a warren of streets, a new subway has been built; yet, the monuments remain, and the city has kept its atmosphere.

Alternatively, progress has shortcomings: There is more traffic, the air is more polluted, and a beautiful old building, a park, or even an historic landmark tree is no more. The city has grown to be too big, people behave harshly, and pushing each other is the modus operandi. The city ought to be greener. A beautiful view of the open sea or a river is crowded out by buildings. This city has made progress, but with a two-edged sword.

In other cases, there are signs of decay. There are few or no new buildings, streets are potholed, and, not the least, public lighting is antiquated and inefficient. Old and creaky buses ply the streets. There is garbage strewn all over or accumulating in some corners. Stray emaciated dogs roam the streets. The cathedral is there, but its walls are grimy and badly in need of a coat of paint. Residents are poorly dressed, and many walk aimlessly. The changes in the city project decadence, disease, and loss of vigor.

Once the visitor gains knowledge about his former home, even though some details may have escaped with time, he knows where his city stands and what the prognosis is for the city itself or the culture it represents.

Disclaimer: This paper does not represent or wish to represent the views of the institutions to which the author belongs or has belonged. It has not been vetted by any of them. To the best of the author´s knowledge, there are no conflicts of interest to report.

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The editorial process

I have observed and even have tried to understand the modern medical editorial process. I have been part of it for a long time, but I have not had true executive responsibilities for two decades. With this in mind, I shall direct my observations to some aspects of the publication of scientific periodicals, focusing on the specialty of dermatology so as to complement other work on related subjects elsewhere in this issue.

The "city" to which I am returning is definitely not static and frozen, nor is it decaying and performing autophagy. It is growing, progressing, and changing. I am afraid, however, that some of this growth and change are not for the best. Indeed, some usages and structures are being abandoned for the worst. Some routes of expansion and predominance are dangerous, cumbersome, ineffectual, perverse, or a mixture. Let me stress that I have used the word "some," not "all" or "a majority."

Allow me to point out some concepts that appear as self-evident as Jeffersonian truths.

1. The main purpose of scientific publication is to transmit information and knowledge in a stable form that is permanent and impossible to adulterate. A published paper becomes a source that can be consulted indefinitely and cannot, in itself, be altered.
2. The information (as opposed to consequences derived from it) is trustworthy and ethical, according to the accepted standards of the time and culture to which it belongs.
3. Responsibility for the contents of the published paper remains in the hands of the author. In the case of several authors, there may be gradations of responsibility according to the order of authors in the paper, seniority, or the description of authors' respective tasks, as is becoming the custom in some journals. Responsibility includes both technical and ethical aspects of the contribution.
4. Although essentials in ethics are timeless, there are many nuances according to times and cultures. "Thou shalt not kill" does not convey the same meaning to a Westerner as it might to a follower of Buddhism; for the latter, the extinguishing of any form of life is unacceptable.
5. There is a difference between formal communications and preliminary communiqués, just as there should be for abstracts of oral presentations and the actual lecture. Both printed and electronic publications must follow the identical ethical and methodological standards.
6. Current procedures for the evaluation of manuscripts by editors, members of editorial boards, or other referees concern criticism and evaluation. They are conducive to a better quality of publication and possible elimination of undesirable or undeserving manuscripts. Final responsibility for acceptance or rejection lies with the chief editor of the journal; however, accountability for the veracity of the reported findings and that of the ethical parameters remains with the authors. The editors function as referees, evaluators, and arbitrators, not as censors or inquisitors, nor should they have the powers of such individuals.
7. The main purpose of a given paper is to inform and to advance knowledge. There are other effects of publication, such as fame, reputation, academic advancement, and even monetary rewards. Although these attributes are quite respectable, they should not be considered an end in themselves.
8. Universities, hospitals, research laboratories, and pharmaceutical companies have become big enterprises. Their own interests are intertwined with those of individuals who work in them and/or have financial involvement. It has become a norm to reveal or "disclose" interests that individuals may have as related to a piece of work. This should be applied to the reviewers as well. Disclosure in itself might be either insufficient or excessive, and it has become more of a ritual than anything else. Should a practicing physician "disclose" in a case report that he has some shares of *x* or *y* pharmaceutical company, which manufactures an appropriately prescribed medication? The current climate is such that it may not be sufficient to disclose financial features, but also the apparent influence that they did have (as opposed to that potentially present) in a given study.
9. There was a time when scientific publications were solely the offspring of enterprising individuals (most of them scientists) or scientific societies. Printers were just that, not publishers. This artisanal phase still existed when I was chief editor of *Dermatología Venezolana* (1998-2003) but had waned even then, and definitely now, from journals of international scope.

The role of the publishing houses in publishing scientific information has grown exponentially. Some have created their own journals, hiring and firing the editors and editorial boards, as in the case of the *Canadian Medical Journal.*[1] In other cases, the relationships between publishers and scientific societies or institutions are more symbiotic. They can work extremely well to the benefit of all. Still, publishers may prevail over editors and boards of directors from scientific societies, or the latter may play havoc on editors and publishers. There can be no solution to this; the rules of homeostasis, justice, and plain good sense should prevail.[2]

1. Publication may be a business, but it is not only a business, and perhaps not even mainly a business. The same principles apply when it is understood that a medical center is mainly dedicated to diagnose and cure patients and not to make money, even though it must have sufficient sources of income to function well. The same principle would apply to a solo medical practice. This is very much related to the question: Does the scientific community have the right of access to published information above and beyond that obtained by individual or institutional subscriptions? Or should the access be limited to subscribers, as happens with safe-deposit boxes,

accessible only to those who have a key or know a combination for which they have paid? The expenses incurred by the publishers and a fair profit should be covered by the right to ask for a fair fee when information is accessed by nonsubscribers, but there is a need to provide open access a certain time after publication.
2. One tends to forget that certain journals publish essentially all submissions; for instance, *Proceedings of Scientific National Academies* or journals from certain medical institutions (many of them of the highest quality), as well as local or regional publications. The latter may have a limited pool of authors and a circumscribed readership and distribution. The number of "local" journals and their combined authorship and readership is far from negligible, yet they are seldom included in search engines, and their papers tend to languish in oblivion. Needless to say, this does not apply to proceedings of prestigious academies. Most accredited journals receive more manuscripts than it is possible to publish, and selection is imperative, based on quality and actuality of information. Paradoxically, some outstanding papers may face problems in being published or in having their importance acknowledged, because they are ahead of their times and/or of predominant ideas. This happened for instance when Peyton Rous published his finding of producing and transmitting malignant tumors by specific viruses. Although Rous' finding took place in 1911, its revolutionary importance began to be appreciated only in the 1950s. The Nobel Prize was belatedly awarded to Rous in 1966, when he was 87 years of age.

Manuscripts are often scanned by editors, and obvious miscarriages are curetted away. The rest is distributed to selected referees. Their ideas and suggestions determine whether a paper is accepted or rejected in a straightforward manner or goes into a purgatory-like process before going on to Paradise (ie, printed or published electronically) or being sent back to the Hell of rejection.

This process (about which more will be written later) is not the only conceivable one. It is the one that has prevailed for about 200 years. It presupposes that not all provided information is suitable for publication. The process is based upon the concept that prospective readers need some tutoring or guidance and that readership would "gag" if exposed to all possible information.

An alternative (superficially a more "democratic" one) is that all information should be distributed, and readers should fend for themselves. In the early years of journal publication, such ideas were part of the experimentation involved.[3]

Current tendencies

When grapes are fermenting, the winemaker already has inklings of what kind of wine will be developing and knows how to channel this process. I see the following:

1. A tendency to broadcast information at diverse levels of control and purification. In the wine region of Rioja in Spain, a given winery may market bottled wine from the same vineyard. Some bottles are sold with less than a year's aging or no aging in oak; they are called *vino joven* (young wine); *crianza, reserva,* and *gran reserva* wines have respectively one year in oak and one in bottle, one year in oak and at least two in bottle, and two or more years in cask and three in bottle.[4] Prices, qualities, and length of further conservation differ in these diverse categories. The consumer must be, and usually is, in the know.
2. Getting published has morphed into several categories from the simple presentation of straightforward information.
   a. Direct financial gain
   b. Academic advancement
   c. Increased prestige
   d. Power
   e. Some combination of a-d

As with the case of sexual relations, there are very legitimate ways to achieve them, and there are illegitimate and even illegal means. The definition of these categories changes as a function of time and of geographic and cultural patterns, as well as with the status of institutions and individuals. As the Romans might say, "Quod licet lovem non licet bovem" (What is permissible for Zeus or Jupiter is not permissible for an ox). In contrast, often prominent individuals or institutions are subject to stricter standards than others. Parameters may vary also with "relative prominence" as opposed to overall prominence. A sheriff may get away with actions or behaviors that would not be tolerated in a Supreme Court justice, even if these actions would not be strictly illegal.

Significant problems

The sheer amount of published information has grown. Search engines are needed. They store it and release information *on demand.* There is a selection for storage and limitations, and this has changed over the years. Unfortunately, search engines and data storage have morphed from the floppy disk to the cloud. Information may be lost or even unused. This leads to "what I cannot retrieve with *x* or *y* search engine does not exist," creating major problems; ie, significant concepts may be lost and important data forgotten.

There is a recent and growing trend in the United States and several other Western nations that I might call "holier than thou." There had been injustices in these societies in the past. These injustices (real, supposed, or a mixture thereof) should be redressed, if real. Unfortunately, there is a movement and mood to do it at once and to magnify the depth of the eventual injustices and most importantly the magnitude and scope of punishments applied.

There are misbehaviors that deserve a social reprimand, but not a legal punishment. Institutions, services, and individuals

should not be punished for doing in the past what was then acceptable and legal. To carry this to the point of absurdity, should publishers "retract" the *Bible* because Moses was polygamous and condemned practicing homosexuals to death? Should Jefferson´s writings be deleted and deemed invalid, because he had slaves and likely had offspring with a slave woman?[5–8]

Integrity in science is a must. Published results should be valid. Some retractions are indeed necessary and salutary; nevertheless, an epidemic of retractions, particularly those imposed upon unwilling authors by editors or publishers smacks in my opinion of "Autos-de-Fé". Burning dissenters alive, even if figuratively, is never conducive to free inquiry and scientific progress.[9] Similarly, mixing features of private lives with scientific or academic endeavors, except when such features alter the truth or validity of published findings, should not be tolerated.

Sometimes issues are not that clear. Is there a legitimate role for whistle-blowers? This is particularly so with those who are not satisfied with a letter to the editor pointing out shortcomings of a paper or actual falsification of results? What happens if a whistle-blower is an enemy or rival (open or concealed) of a successful author? The whistle-blower may still be right, whatever the reasons for his action. There are no clear-cut rules of behavior except for two that may be at odds with each other: Every author is deemed honest until proven otherwise, and every objection is rightful and should be proven wrong before it is deleted.[10–12]

A recent editorial in *Science* tells the saga of one of such unpleasant, yet instructive, interaction.[13]

Whistle-blowers knew, from witnessing the experiments, that reported preference of fish for microplastics over live prey was exciting but fraudulent.

A better future

I do not want to predict the distant future. The "Space Odyssey" did not happen in 2001 and has not happened since then, even if Stanley Kubrick's film is a masterpiece and Arthur C. Clarke a gifted futurist. My perceived task is to outline what I deem right for the relatively short-term future as measured in years, not decades.

Printed journals should and will remain, not only because their contents are easier to control, but also because writing over a physical structure has an outstanding record for permanence. It may be brick, stone, papyrus, parchment, or paper. We have and can mostly decipher writings from antiquity, and even paintings from the past.[14] Can we guarantee the same with electronic means?

Journals and their editors should stop being accomplices of the manipulations fostered by the climbers of the academic ladder. Perfectly useful indexes (such as the Science Citation Index) are wrongly used to "evaluate" the relative "weights or values" of publications. The American Society of Microbiology has omitted publication of Science Citation Index in its journals. Although the latter surely and legitimately use it for their internal evaluation of their journals' performances, this is not enough. Editorials should be written in our specialty journals to abhor this perverse use of a useful measurement. Many journals write about subjects such as the perceived discrimination against female scientists, those with variant sexual orientation, or contributors with exotic last names. The subject that I outlined has a similar importance at the very least.

Editorial teams created by editors and editorial board members may function as the proverbial "old boys' clubs" have done. There is some truth in this observation; this is not only ingrained in human nature, but it also works very well if the principle of noblesse oblige also applies. Academies, Nobel Prize committees, museum admissions, and library acquisitions, plus top legislative bodies including the British House of Lords, all work well and justly under the unwritten rules of old boys' clubs, noblesse oblige included. Catastrophe ensues when an apparent objectivity takes place, eg, referees and authors are equally ignorant of each other's identity and source of the work or because the old boys' clubs become corrupt and erase the noblesse oblige clause from their unwritten constitutions.

Search machines should become even better and encompass literature of the past, as well as that of the present and the works to come. All scientific publications should be "listed." One of the key papers of 20th-century medicine was that of Antonio Béguez César (1895-1975)[15,16] from Cuba. It introduced, without naming it, the concept of lysosomal disease. What he described is now known as Chédiak-Higashi syndrome, because Chediak did publish (afterward) in English. The same might apply to the identification of the Langerhans cell of the skin as a macrophage by Imelda Campo-Aasen (1922-2000) from Venezuela (but working at that time in Great Britain). Imagine, she had the naiveté of publishing her paper in the first issue[17,18] of *Medicina Cutánea,* an Ibero-Latin American journal. Readers may know of other examples.

The challenge

A final thought: If these lines elicit criticisms or if readers realize its many shortcomings and look for different answers, I shall have reached my goal in writing this paper.

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